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DISCUSSION PAPER No. 3

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CREATING A MANAGER FROM OUR AUDITS

BY

ALAN GILMORE

AUGUST 1981

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PREFACE

The intent of this paper is to encourage further thought and discussion on our concept of the work of the senior public service manager and its relationship to our audit procedures. Some of the questions addressed include: Is our perspective realistic, what is its impact on what we audit, and should we consider changing some of the emphasis of our audit approach?

As indicated, the paper reflects the views and opinions of the author and not necessarily those of the Office of the Auditor General. It is based on the work of Henry Mintzberg and personal observation of the public service manager, but is not the result of systematic empirical research.

DRAFT FOR
DISCUSSION
PURPOSES ONLY

IN OUR IMAGE: CREATING A MANAGER FROM OUR AUDITS*

by

Alan Gilmore

Organizations which propose to examine the workings of other people and recommend improvements to their activities tend to have an image of those people and activities in a state of nature. The OAG is no exception. The focus of our audits and the content of our reports suggest to me a clear, if not voiced, image of the senior public service managers and what their role should be. In our image, the public service manager is that of a hyper-rational resource optimizer, who spends the majority of time planning, controlling and evaluating the activities of the organization so as to optimize economy, efficiency and effectivenesss. In order to do this the OAG assumes, and our audits enforce, the principle that the public service manager requires a vast array of systems. These control systems range from project and program planning systems to support services systems such as EDP.

How useful is this type of image of public service managers? Does a review of their activities indicate that our image and recommendations cover the main part of their role and activities or are our concerns relevant to a small component of their jobs? This paper argues that the latter is the case.

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* The term manager refers to upper middle and senior public service managers.

Job Texture

Let's begin by arguing that management in the public service is basically an open-ended job with a great quantity of work which is not escapable. The work is taken home and people tend to concentrate on their job during much of their "free time". Activities ar characterized by variety and fragmentation. The vast majority are of brief duration. Atmosphere shifts are quick and frequent. To some extent this pattern is not forced upon the manager. At some point, either because of personality or because of conditioning, brevity and interruptions appear to be actually preferred. The manager seems to become conditioned to these workloads and faces the fact that superficiality is an occupational hazard.

The physical pattern of the job reflects, and is reinforced by, content preferences. The manager gravitates to the more active developments of the work, the current, the specific, the well-defined and non-routine activities. Routine activities such as mail processing are viewed as a burden. Only action mail receives careful attention. Current information, such as gossip, hearsay, speculation are favoured; routine reports are not. Time scheduling reflects a concern with concrete issues. The pressure of the job does not encourage planning but rather an adapted information manipulation which works to favour live action.

Communications

The emphasis on action coupled with fragmented and brief activities leads to verbal and written contacts dominating the manager's work. Available

are five contact media: documented material, telephone conversations, unscheduled meetings, that is, informal face-to-face discussions, scheduled meetings, that is, formal face-to-face discussions, and touring which is observational. The public service manager clearly favours the three verbal media, spending most time in verbal contact. Lengthy documents, reports, periodicals and so on, and formal communications are answered, but the process is time-consuming and of little interest to most managers. Telephone conversations and unscheduled meetings are used by the manager when information or requests must be transmitted quickly.

In the public service the scheduled meeting consumes more of the manager's time than any other media. Scheduled meetings allow contacts of long duration, of a formal nature, with large groups of people, away from the organization. Activities for the purposes of ceremony, strategy-making and negotiation generally take place at scheduled meetings. Of special interest at scheduled meetings is the general discussion at the beginning and end which frequently involve the flow of central information.

Touring - when the manager goes through the organization, casually looking at who is working, who is where, who is doing what, provides the manager with an opportunity to observe activity informally without prearrangement. Interestingly, the manager spends little time in open-ended touring.

External contacts generally consume about one-third of the manager's contact time. They have a great variety and mostly they serve as an information network. This is especially true of associates and peers, but clients and suppliers

also fit into this category. These non-line relationships are significant and a critical component of the manager's job.

Subordinates generally consume about one-fourth of the manager's contact time. The manager interacts briefly with a wide variety of subordinates, by-passing formal channels of communication to do so. This time is usually spent in making requests or sending or receiving information and making strategy. The manager spends relatively little time, generally in the order of about 10%, with superiors.

Roles

Most public service managers are responsible for many of their own initial commitments which then lock them into a set of ongoing activities of some duration. Such commitments give the manager the opportunity to extract information, exercise leadership, and so forth.

Managerial roles in the public service can be divided into three groups, those that are primarily concerned with interpersonal relationships, those that deal with the transfer of information and those that essentially involve decision-making. These three roles can be further subdivided. Interpersonal roles include figurehead, leader and liaison. As a figurehead, the manager is a symbolic head of the unit and is obliged to perform a number of routine duties of a legal or social nature. As a leader, the manager is responsible for the motivation and activation of subordinates, and for staffing, training and associated duties. In a liaison capacity, the manager maintains self-development networks of outside contacts and informers

who provide favours and information. In an informational role, the manager acts as a monitor, seeking, receiving and guarding a wide variety of special information, much of it current, to develop and maintain an understanding of the organization and its environment. If successful, the manager emerges as a nerve centre of internal and external information for the unit. Some of the information is selectively disseminated, for example, the information received from outsiders or from other subordinates may be transmitted to members of the unit. Some information is factual, some involves interpretation and integration. As a spokesperson, the manager transmits information to outsiders on the unit's plans, policies, actions, results, serving at times as an "expert".

In the role of decision-maker, the manager acts as an entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator and negotiator. She/he searches for opportunities and initiates projects. Perhaps the most important function is to anticipate and protect the unit, and sometimes the organization, from unexpected disturbances. The manager allocates resources, both money and people. As a negotiator, the manager represents the unit as strategy initiator, co-ordinator, and spokesperson.

OAG Audit Relevance

If we examine the comprehensive audits conducted by the Office what we may find is that at best we are covering only some, and perhaps the less significant, aspects of the manager's role. Often, during the course of our comprehensive audits we look at training, we review structured information

related to monitoring, and we cover the formal aspects of the resource allocation. However, we do little in terms of examining the functions of negotiating, disturbance handling, information dissemination, informal monitoring and liaison or the processes leading to a decision and the delivery of services to clients. In this sense then we are covering perhaps one-fifth of the activities of the public service manager.

Information systems such as OPMS, evaluation, internal audits, are a key focus of our audits. We seem to assume that most of the information the manager should have available should be formal and documented. Yet, a good deal of the information that the public service manager receives is not documented, and in fact it is to the manager's advantage not to have to rely on documented information. The manager's advantage lies in the current non-documented information transmitted largely by word of mouth. In fact, as indicated, managers have a strong preference for current information much of which is necessarily unsubstantiated, even gossip, and for information on events rather than on trends. This kind of information, not that carried in formal reports, forms the heart of the manager's information system. The manager develops an understanding by piecing together all the information. As a result, the manager can expect little help in the performance of the monitor role from the traditional formal information systems. It provides largely historical, aggregated information whereas the manager seeks current trigger information. Managers therefore design their own information system by developing contacts and by establishing special communication channels within the organization.

In terms of decision-making, managers may not make decisions in the way our audits appear to expect. Managerial decision-making in the public service is essentially a series of decisions. There are steps, some of them in sequence, some going back and forth, there is a juggling among a number of projects. This kind of situation may not be recognized sufficiently in our audits.

Handling of disturbances occupies a good part of the public service manager's time, and by their nature disturbances come up suddenly. Disturbances are seldom found in the routine flow of information in reports. Rather, they are defined by ad hoc stimuli, generally in the form of instant communication. Often the information is carried to the manager by someone who realizes that a disturbance has occurred or who wishes to encourage a disturbance. Sometimes the manager may encourage a disturbance. Managers tend to allow disturbance handling to take priority. They rework their schedule and devote the bulk of their energy to developing short-term solutions. The primary concern appears to be to relieve the pressures acting on them. Often, this buys time so that a project can eventually be initiated on a more leisurely basis. But crises have a lot of secondary benefits. It is during crises that public service managers have much more influence than during non-crises periods. This is ironic but nonetheless true. Thus while we believe or assume that managers in the public service should have long-range perspectives, and should be reflective planners, it seems evident that managers spend a good part of their time reacting quickly to high pressure disturbing situations. These arise not only because poor managers ignore situations until they reach crises proportions but also because good managers cannot anticipate the consequences of all actions taken by their organizations.

Our image seems to view the manager's objective of achieving a well-run organization like a symphony orchestra conductor maintaining a melodious performance of various instruments in a co-ordinated sequence. Yet as a result of both preference and environment, public service managers conduct the orchestra to their own advantage while stagehands move music stands around, the concert sponsor insists on irrational changes in the program and perhaps rewrites the music, and the audience doubts the competency of the musicians. The successful public service manager is thus a superbly talented scrambler.

OAG Audit Scope

It would be unfair to conclude that the rational resource allocator image of the manager is not without some foundation. However, it would appear that such a concept of the manager is limited and, therefore, our audits may be limited to those situations where formal planning, control and evaluation procedures are useful for personal and unit survival. What kind of situations would lend themselves to the use of such formal systems?

To begin, the manager must be dealing with proposals that:

- have clearly discernible costs and benefits;
- are competing for specified resources with other known proposals; and

- can wait for a certain time of the year or at least for some review point.

Some proposals satisfy these requirements. However it may be that in the great majority of cases the conditions for formal systems are not met. Non-monetary costs may often predominate and be ill-defined. Many requests may require special consideration. Requests for authorization may often be presented individually. The competing requests may not be known and the scheduling of the decision may be such that the manager and organization cannot wait to find out what they are. In these cases, the manager's approval may be sought and demanded on an ad hoc basis.

In response to such an environment, we can continue to focus on formal systems and somewhat knowingly turn a deaf ear to the reality of the public service environment or can argue from a normative position that things should follow our audit criteria. In a concession to reality, we can limit our normative approach to those situations where the prerequisite conditions for formal systems exist. We could identify and audit the cases where our assumptions apply.

Alternatively, we could attempt to expand our methodology to allow us to cover the more dynamic aspects of the public service manager's job. However, the prospect of auditing informal communication networks, negotiations, and the like is somewhat daunting.

Finally, we could refocus our audits on program delivery - on whether the taxpayer receives the goods and services. Our concern would be more on the quality of the delivery system and quantity of outputs rather than only the processes and procedures used to plan, control, and evaluate. How long does it take for mail to be delivered, payments for services to be paid or service to be rendered at CEIC offices? Processes and procedures would remain important but the emphasis would be on what is delivered to Canadians.

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